

Iron Guards: First Group of Columbia County Volunteers Inducted into the Union Army

George A. Turner

Introduction: *William W. Ricketts, a twenty-four years old resident of Orangeville, recruited and organizing the first company of volunteers from Columbia County known as the Iron Guards. He had attended the United States Military Academy at West Point in the academic year of 1855-56 but did not graduate;¹ afterwards he enrolled in Pennsylvania Medical College at Philadelphia.*

When first organized, the Iron Guards consisted of seventy-seven men; the average age was twenty-two with the youngest being eighteen and the oldest forty-one. Eighty-seven percent of the men came from Columbia County; Catawissa with twenty-seven volunteers had the largest representation with Bloomsburg next with nineteen men. They represented a wide variety of occupations. Farmers and carpenters, each with nine individuals, comprised the two largest groups; others included blacksmiths, iron furancemen, laborers, lawyers, teachers, shoemakers, boatmen, printers, and tanners.² Members of the company elected Ricketts to be their captain.

They left Bloomsburg on May 7 by canal boat for Camp Curtin in Harrisburg; some two thousand citizens came to send them off.³ Before the troops departed, people of Columbia County provided money to outfitted the men with two flannel shirts, two pair of drawers, one pair of pants, cap, belt, and one pair of hose.⁴ A number of citizens and the Bloomsburg Cornet Band accompanied the volunteers on their trip.⁵ One of the volunteers, Charles B. Brockway, wrote a letter to Levi L. Tate, editor of the Columbia Democrat, which commented on the Iron Guards departure, the receptions they received along the way, arrival at Harrisburg, camp conditions, and assigned the responsibility of patrolling the camp.⁶

When the Iron Guards arrived at Camp Curtin, they became Company A, one of the ten companies comprising the 35th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers, Sixth Reserves. At a Bloomsburg meeting, Dr. Palemon John, editor of the Columbia Republican, reported the Iron Guards were . . . "the finest looking and best disciplined company in Camp Curtin."⁷

This letter appears in its original form, transcribed as written. The purpose is to retain the true character so as not to alter or misrepresent the way the author wrote since it reveals something about the writer.

Charles B. Brockway's Letter to Levi L. Tate Camp Curtin, Harrisburg, Pa, May 14, 1861

Dear Sir: In accordance with a promise made to you, and in order to gratify the curiosity of inquiring friends, I proceed to write you a few words about the "Iron Guards" and Camp Curtin.

It was with a heavy heart that some of us embarked on board the *Rolling Wave*, and gave our farewells to the assembled hundreds at Port Noble.⁸ It was not regret for what we had done that saddened our thoughts, but the reflection that some and perhaps all of us were bidding *final*

adieux to weeping friends and that many of us were beholding the spires of Bloomsburg for the last time.

We stopped a short time at Cattawissa bridge, where a number of citizens had assembled. Our next stopping place was Danville, where, notwithstanding the rain a large crowd assembled. A multitude also greeted us at Northumberland, among which was a large sprinkling of the fair sex. The Collector was kind enough to pass us free of toll. Our excellent band played them a few choice tunes after which we turned our attention to our larder, which we found plentifully stored with the necessaries of life. Our beds consisted of straw strewn along the bottom of the boat. This was comfortable enough had there been room; but experience showed us that 100 men more than filled it; hence many slept on deck. The noise and confusion even then precluded the idea of sleep, except to the eyes of those who had been patrolling the night before. We were all routed up at Selinsgrove, where we were met by the brass band. A barrel of tar was burnt to show us up to the citizens. We proceeded without further stoppages to Harrisburg. Along the whole route we were cordially welcomed, and heartily cheered. One patriotic individual supplied the whole party with as much milk as they could drink. — Another gave a quantity of bread, pies, etc. We reached Harrisburg about 3 o'clock of the day after we started. Capt. Ricketts immediately formed the company and marched us through the principal streets of the City and Capitol grounds. — On the route the constant inquiry was, Where are you from? As praise after praise fell from the lips of the spectators, we began to conceive a better opinion of ourselves and bear ourselves as soldiers indeed. We halted in front of the governor's room, and were briefly reviewed by him. The Governor, members of the Legislature, and military men present pronounced the Company to be the best drilled and equipped that had made its appearance in Harrisburg. We were then marched to Camp Curtin, about a mile to the north of the City. — We found there assembled some 1000 men of different degrees of advancement in military tactics. Some three or four hundred backwoodsmen presented an unique appearance in their fantastic dresses, and hats ornamented with a "*buck-tails*."⁹ Our camp, was formerly the ground of the Dauphin Co. Agricultural Society and contains about 125 acres. The buildings are used for the accommodation of soldiers. Quite a number of tents are also scattered over the field. The quarters assigned us were formerly hog pens, but we slept soundly in them. — The next day two regiments left, the 14th and 15th and we then changed our quarters to those formerly occupied by the "Union Guards" of Reading. It was a delightful change from a *hog pen* to a *horse stable*. Your humble servant found himself sufficiently small to sleep under the feed trough. 'Tis true that the roof is somewhat of a *sieve* charter, but then as soldiers we have become accustomed to rain. Our Committee generously gave us each five dollars for spending money before they left us. We felt sorry to part from them and also with the band. We did not realize our situation until they left. The Friday after we reached this place Capt. Ricketts had the whole camp placed under his charge. Our whole Company were on guard for 24 hours, and that, too, during a drenching rain. We soon established a new order of things in this camp and quiet and order soon took the place of noise and confusion. Running in and out of camp was prohibited, much to the chagrin of many who were accustomed to make nightly visits to Harrisburg. We feared a little

trouble from the buck-tails,¹⁰ but a little decision on our part sent them to their tents. I even had the audacity to refuse the commanding officer admittance, because he had no pass. The appreciation of our services is shown by the fact that Col. Seiler has requested us to guard the camp for the next 24 hours, assigning as a reason, *that he could not trust the others*. It is too much for use to stand 48 hours the first week of our arrival, especially when it is considered that there are about 30 Companies in Camp. However, honor must be earned. Our rations so far, consist of bread, butter, and meat with coffee once a day. Our amusements are various. But as this communication is getting to be too lengthy, I will not attempt their description at present. I will try and write to you again.

Respectfully, Yours, &c.

C. B. Brockway

This letter is in *Civil War Letters from Soldiers and Citizens of Columbia County, Pennsylvania*, edited by George A. Turner, on pages nine and ten.

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- ¹ West Point officials brought charges against Ricketts for leaving his guard duty on two instances during the night of February 20, 1856. Consequently, his actions resulted in a court-martial and dismissal from the military academy. He wrote to his father explaining that the weather was so cold that he came into the barracks to get warm and regretted causing him such pain and embarrassment. William W. Ricketts to E. G. Ricketts, March 16, 1856, Robert Bruce Ricketts Papers, Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.
 - ² Muster Roll of Company A, 35th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, Record Group 19, Records of the Department of Military Affairs, Office of the Adjutant General, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa.
 - ³ *The Star of the North* (Bloomsburg, PA), May 8, 1861.
 - ⁴ *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, PA), May 11, 1861.
 - ⁵ *The Star of the North*, May 8, 1861.
 - ⁶ *Columbia Democrat*, May 18, 1861
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*
 - ⁸ Port Noble was the North Branch Canal Port at Bloomsburg. It was in the area what is today the intersection of Eleventh and Railroad Streets
 - ⁹ The term “buck-tails” applied to the men recruited from the counties of Forest, McKean, and Elk. They became part of the 42nd Pennsylvania Regiment.